

Slow down NH, and smell the snowplows

Many New Hampshire drivers venture into snow storms, sleet and freezing rain in vehicles equipped with all-wheel drive, four-wheel drive, anti-lock brakes, traction control and dashboard displays that show when road temperatures can slick over into black ice.

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A coating of early snow brushed the northern reaches of Interstate-89 in Grantham where state troopers worked to clear a jack-knifed tractor trailer rig from the highway last month.

"Look out!" State Police Sgt. Ronald Taylor heard someone yell. Taylor turned in time to see a royal blue Ford Focus crash through a 15-foot embankment and come somersaulting right at him.

"There was no way I could get out of its path in time. I dove for the dirt," Taylor said

The 2,700 pounds of steel and glass hit the ground about 5 feet from Taylor, bounced, and spun over his head.

"It ended up rolling over me," he added.

The Focus flipped and hit dirt at least two more times before landing in the southbound lane on the exact spot where the tow truck driver had been standing seconds before another trooper pushed him out of the way.

For Taylor, it was a narrow miss. But far from his first.

"None of these accidents happen because of bad weather. They happen because of bad driving. They are either going too fast or not paying attention. That's why we call them crashes, and not accidents," explained Taylor, a 12-year veteran assigned to Troop D barracks.

Welcome to winter driving season in New Hampshire.

Many New Hampshire drivers venture into snow storms, sleet and freezing rain in vehicles equipped with all-wheel drive, four-wheel drive, anti-lock brakes, traction control and dashboard displays that show when road temperatures can slick over into black ice. But experts say these advances really haven't done much to make us safer drivers.

Don't rely on vehicle

Worse, motorists may develop an inflated sense of confidence in their vehicle's capacity to handle anything nature can throw at them.

"No matter how good the technology gets, no matter what safety features you have in your car, you still have to use discretion. You still can't beat nature," said Daniel Andrews, state coordinator of the AARP driver safety program.

Experts unanimously agree on the two best winter safety driving tips. Both cost nothing and are very low-tech: Slow down. And leave enough space between you and the other driver to stop and turn without going into a skid, off the road, or slamming into a vehicle.

"Just going slow is the most important thing," Manchester Police Sgt. Andrew Vincent said of the force's traffic unit said.

"Sometimes people think they are invincible because they are in a four-wheel drive vehicle. But all four-wheel drive does is help you gain traction so you can get momentum to move forward. Four-wheel drive doesn't help you stop and it's not necessarily going to help you turn either," Vincent said.

Slowing down involves much more than curbing your speed while driving. It means doing everything slower - slower acceleration from a stop, turning slower to avoid fishtailing and skid outs, and braking slower.

From there, driving experts offer a variety of suggestions to improve winter driver safety. While they will help you travel in bad weather, none will make you invincible, said David C.

Henderson, executive director of the Safety & Health Council of Northern New England, which is the local chapter of the nonprofit National Safety Council.

And in case very bad road conditions, Henderson suggested the best thing to do is stay home until roads are cleared and treated.

Safe equipment

The type of vehicle isn't as important as maintaining it well and making sure you have good quality tires that are properly inflated.

All-season tires are reliable standbys, experts say. But snow tires offer better traction and can be a better choice in snow, particularly for those who travel during storms or live in snowy areas. For those who travel in areas with harsh winter conditions, studded tires and even chains

might be a better choice, experts say. (States have limits on when studded tires can be used.)

"Snow tires are probably the most logical option of all. There is an expense because you are buying another set of tires just for winter," said John Benson, owner of Benson's Driving School, which has its main office in Fremont. Benson has all-season tires on his car, which he says is fine for Seacoast winters.

"If I lived in the Monadnock region, I would probably have snow tires all the way around. I would probably have studded tires," Benson said.

Make sure you're all of your vehicle is in working order, not just tires, Henderson advised. You can have the best winter tires on your car, but if you can't see the road because your windshield wipers are worn or your wiper fluid is low, you're in a potentially hazardous situation. Keep your vehicle tuned. Make sure your defroster and heater work. Clear all ice and snow from the roof and windows, which motorists must do by law.

Most vehicles in New Hampshire are front-wheel drive. Motorists who use sand tubes or other items to add weight and improve traction should never place them in the passenger compartment where they can become flying objects during a collision or quick stop. Secure them in the trunk as close to the front of the car as possible, Benson said.

Experts also say slow down on bridges and overpasses, which freeze first because air circulates beneath them. Black ice is most prevalent at dusk and dawn.

Watch for shaded areas on roads where dry pavement can suddenly become slick with ice. Should you skid off the road and are waiting for help, it is critical to clear your tailpipe of snow or anything that blocks fumes from escaping. Otherwise, potentially deadly carbon monoxide will back up into the car's passenger compartment. If you cannot get out and clear the tailpipe, shut off the vehicle's engine, experts say.

One of the biggest safety concerns on the roads is motorists who follow snow plows too closely or try to overtake them, Henderson added.

Not only can motorists not see well if they follow plows too closely, but plow drivers also cannot see them. Passing a plow truck is very dangerous because accelerating could cause you to lose control of your vehicle.